

Dear Chairman Genachowski and Commissioners Copps, McDowell, Clyburn, and Baker,

As a student in an Interpreter Training Program, I have the great fortune of meeting deaf individuals who communicate by videophone in American Sign Language using VRS. I believe this life-altering broadband service is a vital link that connects deaf people to the hearing community.

Ensuring that deaf individuals have access to VRS and encouraging improvements in VRS should be a high priority for you as Chairman and Commissioners of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires the FCC to make available to all deaf individuals nationwide “functionally-equivalent” communications.

You will soon determine the future of VRS. When you set the VRS rate, you will determine whether America makes progress toward the statutory goals of functional equivalence, nationwide access and inclusion “ or force deaf users to revert to TTY communications. And, you will determine whether VRS fulfills its potential to drive broadband adoption by the deaf, even in the face of poverty and isolation.

I was deeply disturbed to see the Commission’s recent Public Notice on VRS rates. These proposals would put an end to VRS as we know it. I have been informed that if these proposed rates are adopted, Sorenson Communication would head into bankruptcy. This would be disastrous for deaf VRS users, as well as other VRS providers using Sorenson’s technology.

The FCC should be increasing the availability and use of VRS, not cutting back. You should adopt a rate that encourages continuing improvements in VRS technology and continues to improve services levels. Recent developments in VRS are a good example of how the service can be improved, such as enhanced 911 services, 10-digit numbering, a larger and better-trained pool of interpreters and better videophones with an array of enhanced features. Monthly payments for broadband are a big expense for many deaf people, and instead of trying to cut back on VRS, you should be exploring ways to make VRS over broadband more affordable to deaf individuals.

Progress towards functional equivalence will be destroyed if the FCC does not encourage VRS providers to improve VRS and make it more widely available. VRS is a recent and dramatic advancement that benefits those who are deaf, but so much more can be done. It would be tragic if the FCC were to destroy this broadband service that is so vital to the deaf.

Recent reports of fraud in the VRS industry are disturbing to me as a tax-paying citizen. The FCC must devote more of its time and energy to focusing on the elimination of fraud.

I urge you to establish a fair and predictable rate for VRS that will encourage VRS providers to invest in improving VRS and reaching more deaf individuals. The law requires it and it is the right thing to do.

Sincerely,
Jodi firsten

I recently received notice that the FCC is proposing a rate cut for VRS providers in a disproportionate manner. Smaller VRS companies will be compensated, according to the proposal, at a rate of \$6.03 per minute. Sorenson Communications will be compensated at a rate of \$3.89 per minute. If this proposal is adopted, Sorenson will be forced into bankruptcy. This will be disastrous on many levels.

- The Deaf Community is a linguistic minority that has suffered oppression by the majority throughout history. Today, VRS has provided "functional equivalency" as never experienced in the history of telecommunications. No longer do they have to type a phone conversation, their second language, English, to express their thoughts. No longer do they have hearing persons hang up on them because they cannot be bothered with the slower and awkward conversation resulting from a typed relay conversation.

- Sorenson Communications has invested millions of dollars to bring VRS technology to where it

is today and continues in areas of technological advancements. They provide video phones to deaf citizens at no cost. Once receiving this equipment, the deaf consumers are able to use any VRS provider they choose. Other VRS providers advertise their services providing links to Sorenson's website to receive their free video phone and then how to set up the VP to use their services. If Sorenson is forced to file bankruptcy, these other VRS providers will be in jeopardy if Sorenson's technology is not available.

- If the FCC rate is cut so drastically, further development to keep up with technological advancements will be impossible.
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires the FCC to make available to all deaf individuals nationwide "functionally-equivalent" communications.
- Many VRS consumers will pay for broadband internet access required to use their VPs and VRS, giving up other life amenities. Having equal access to phone communication is that important. It is not a luxury to have this access; it is a necessity and a right to have "functionally equivalent" communication.
- If VRS providers cannot afford to provide services and shut down, deaf people will be forced to use TTYs for phone conversations. They will lose real-time and "functionally equivalent" communication. They will lose their ability to express themselves using ASL through VRS. Hearing people tend not to be patient with TTY relay calls. Losing VRS will have a serious adverse impact on the lives of members of the Deaf Community and their receiving equal access via phone communication.
- There are many forms of oppression. If the FCC adopts a rate that causes a company like Sorenson to collapse, a company who has developed and continues to develop technology to provide equal access to deaf and hard of hearing people, technology that other VRS providers use to provide services for their consumers, VRS as we know it will cease to exist. This will result in oppression of deaf people, forcing them use an antiquated means of communication to access phone services. Deaf people will go backwards as the rest of society moves forward, benefiting from improved technology.

Sincerely,
Jodi firsten

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